

LIFE & STYLE

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A Place of Respite in the Heart of the City

AROUND TOWN

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As chapels go, it's not very imposing—no stained glass, no rococo pulpit. Votive candles flicker, incense fills the air. A bird cage, door open, hangs by the single window.

The open door is symbolic, explains Sharon Kagan. "When there is real love, the things that keep us caged open up. Love opens the door."

We are sitting on a small wooden pew in the L.A. Love Chapel, a tiny space tucked above a construction company and a nail salon in a small, nondescript commercial building in Santa Monica. One wonders how anyone finds it. But since Kagan, a painter and art teacher, opened her chapel 16 months ago, more than 300 people have come to pray, or meditate or just to find a moment's solitude.

Some are friends; many are strangers. Kagan has no idea how the visitors from Minnesota, New York and Italy who signed the guest book heard about the Love Chapel.

All are welcome, though after vandals left cigarette butts and pulled down some of the drapes, she stopped leaving the chapel open 24 hours a day.

"Somebody came in and signed in as Satan, which really freaked me out," Kagan says. "Then I had a recurring dream, that I'd open the door and everything would be gone"—the fanciful carved Balinese angel that flies out of the bird cage, arms outstretched. And the empty old suitcase that to Kagan symbolizes both the excess baggage that we carry through life and "the hopes and dreams that we carry with us."

And the ornate accordion that she bought at a garage sale to add a touch of whimsy.

Now, a little note tacked to the door asks that visitors call for an appointment—(310) 450-3361. They still come, leaving notes or prayers or wishes on cards Kagan provides:

"Blessings upon all who come to share and enjoy the love."

"Thank you for a wonderful experience."

"The angels are watching!"

"Bravo!"

"Cool!"

One visitor left a wish for a sick friend, that she would "find peace in heaven." Written in a childish scrawl is, "I wish Auntie a husband."

Some come simply seeking respite from the city's hurly-burly. The chapel is a quiet place away from faxes and phones, albeit with the traffic zipping along Pico Boulevard below. Some come to ask that love enter their lives. Others leave prayers that barriers and borders separating communities will tumble.

Some come to grieve. Kagan remembers a couple who came on a Saturday night; they had just lost a child.

The chapel is adjacent to Kagan's studio, where she creates paintings with recurring themes of the interplay between art and spirituality. She originally rented the space—at \$120 a month—for storage.

But, "I sat in here for 20 minutes and said, 'So much for storage space.'" Since the 1992 riots, she'd dreamed of creating a public sanctuary where people could contemplate love and peace.

Kagan, 42, grew up in the Fairfax area when it was a mix of African American, Jewish and Asian American families living together in harmony. It pains her that, in today's L.A., people of different colors and creeds "aren't looking each other in the eye anymore."

She is a child of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who survived the Holocaust, but lost their own parents. No one knows where they are buried, Kagan says, probably in

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mass graves, and she likes to think of the Love Chapel as a final resting place for them.

Kagan was inspired in part by the Santuario de Chamayo in New Mexico, where the faithful cast aside their crutches. (Look behind the door of the Love Chapel and you'll find a pair of crutches.)

The Love Chapel is, to say the least, eclectic. Kagan and a former student created the mosaic tile altar. Most of the objects are junk shop or swap meet finds.

There's a wooden sculpture of a woman bathing. "She's not a goddess. She's a real woman. She's beautiful but, most of all, she's comfortable in her body," Kagan says.

There's a drum for people to beat, should they feel the need. Because Kagan worried that the space, with its damask and velvet draperies, was too feminine, she added a carved bison and an antique toy dump truck to make it "a place for men to come and land" as well. The truck symbolizes "stuff we have to dump in order to let love in."

To her, the chapel is a spiritual rather than a religious place. When a visitor left a small cross in a conspicuous spot, Kagan moved it to a less conspicuous spot. She doesn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable here.

Not everyone understands the



IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

Artist Sharon Kagan created the Love Chapel, a sanctuary for people to meditate and find respite.

Love Chapel. At first, Kagan says, some people were "afraid I was trying to start my own religion."

Kagan is undeterred. "People come to L.A. to see Nicole Simpson's condo," she says. "I would much rather they come and see the Love Chapel."